

UNDERSTANDING REGARDING NOTIFICATION,  
CONSULTATION, DISPUTE SETTLEMENT AND SURVEILLANCE

*Adopted on 28 November 1979  
(L/4907)*

1. The CONTRACTING PARTIES reaffirm their adherence to the basic GATT mechanism for the management of disputes based on Articles XXII and XXIII.<sup>1</sup> With a view to improving and refining the GATT mechanism, the CONTRACTING PARTIES agree as follows:

*Notification*

2. Contracting parties reaffirm their commitment to existing obligations under the General Agreement regarding publication and notification.

3. Contracting parties moreover undertake, to the maximum extent possible, to notify the CONTRACTING PARTIES of their adoption of trade measures affecting the operation of the General Agreement, it being understood that such notification would of itself be without prejudice to views on the consistency of measures with or their relevance to rights and obligations under the General Agreement. Contracting parties should endeavour to notify such measures in advance of implementation. In other cases, where prior notification has not been possible, such measures should be notified promptly *ex post facto*. Contracting parties which have reason to believe that such trade measures have been adopted by another contracting party may seek information on such measures bilaterally, from the contracting party concerned.

*Consultations*

4. Contracting parties reaffirm their resolve to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of consultative procedures employed by contracting parties. In that

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<sup>1</sup>It is noted that Article XXV may, as recognized by the CONTRACTING PARTIES, *inter alia*, when they adopted the report of the Working Party on particular difficulties connected with trade in primary products (L/930) also afford an appropriate avenue for consultation and dispute settlement in certain circumstances.

connection, they undertake to respond to requests for consultations promptly and to attempt to conclude consultations expeditiously, with a view to reaching mutually satisfactory conclusions. Any requests for consultations should include the reasons therefor.

5. During consultations, contracting parties should give special attention to the particular problems and interests of less-developed contracting parties.

6. Contracting parties should attempt to obtain satisfactory adjustment of the matter in accordance with the provisions of Article XXIII:1 before resorting to Article XXIII:2.

*Dispute settlement*

7. The CONTRACTING PARTIES agree that the customary practice of the GATT in the field of dispute settlement, described in the Annex, should be continued in the future, with the improvements set out below. They recognize that the efficient functioning of the system depends on their will to abide by the present understanding. The CONTRACTING PARTIES reaffirm that the customary practice includes the procedures for the settlement of disputes between developed and less-developed countries adopted by the CONTRACTING PARTIES in 1966<sup>1</sup> and that these remain available to less-developed contracting parties wishing to use them.

8. If a dispute is not resolved through consultations the contracting parties concerned may request an appropriate body or individual to use their good offices with a view to the conciliation of the outstanding differences between the parties. If the unresolved dispute is one in which a less-developed contracting party has brought a complaint against a developed contracting party, the less-developed contracting party may request the good offices of the Director-General who, in carrying out his tasks, may consult with the Chairman of the CONTRACTING PARTIES and the Chairman of the Council.

9. It is understood that requests for conciliation and the use of the dispute settlement procedures of Article XXIII:2 should not be intended or considered as contentious acts and that, if disputes arise, all contracting parties will engage in these procedures in good faith in an effort to resolve the disputes. It is also understood that complaints and counter-complaints in regard to distinct matters should not be linked.

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<sup>1</sup>BISD 14S/18.

10. It is agreed that if a contracting party invoking Article XXIII:2 requests the establishment of a panel to assist the CONTRACTING PARTIES to deal with the matter, the CONTRACTING PARTIES would decide on its establishment in accordance with standing practice. It is also agreed that the CONTRACTING PARTIES would similarly decide to establish a working party if this were requested by a contracting party invoking the Article. It is further agreed that such requests would be granted only after the contracting party concerned had had an opportunity to study the complaint and respond to it before the CONTRACTING PARTIES.

11. When a panel is set up, the Director-General, after securing the agreement of the contracting parties concerned, should propose the composition of the panel, of three or five members depending on the case, to the CONTRACTING PARTIES for approval. The members of a panel would preferably be governmental. It is understood that citizens of countries whose governments<sup>1</sup> are parties to the dispute would not be members of the panel concerned with that dispute. The panel should be constituted as promptly as possible and normally not later than thirty days from the decision by the CONTRACTING PARTIES.

12. The parties to the dispute would respond within a short period of time, i.e., seven working days, to nominations of panel members by the Director-General and would not oppose nominations except for compelling reasons.

13. In order to facilitate the constitution of panels, the Director-General should maintain an informal indicative list of governmental and non-governmental persons qualified in the fields of trade relations, economic development, and other matters covered by the General Agreement, and who could be available for serving on panels. For this purpose, each contracting party would be invited to indicate at the beginning of every year to the Director-General the name of one or two persons who would be available for such work.<sup>2</sup>

14. Panel members would serve in their individual capacities and not as government representatives, nor as representatives of any organization. Governments would

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<sup>1</sup>In the case customs unions or common markets are parties to a dispute, this provision applies to citizens of all member countries of the customs unions or common markets.

<sup>2</sup>The coverage of travel expenses should be considered within the limits of budgetary possibilities.

therefore not give them instructions nor seek to influence them as individuals with regard to matters before a panel. Panel members should be selected with a view to ensuring the independence of the members, a sufficiently diverse background and wide spectrum of experience.<sup>1</sup>

15. Any contracting party having a substantial interest in the matter before a panel, and having notified this to the Council, should have an opportunity to be heard by the panel. Each panel should have the right to seek information and technical advice from any individual or body which it deems appropriate. However, before a panel seeks such information or advice from any individual or body within the jurisdiction of a State it shall inform the government of that State. Any contracting party should respond promptly and fully to any request by a panel for such information as the panel considers necessary and appropriate. Confidential information which is provided should not be revealed without formal authorization from the contracting party providing the information.

16. The function of panels is to assist the CONTRACTING PARTIES in discharging their responsibilities under Article XXIII:2. Accordingly, a panel should make an objective assessment of the matter before it, including an objective assessment of the facts of the case and the applicability of and conformity with the General Agreement and, if so requested by the CONTRACTING PARTIES, make such other findings as will assist the CONTRACTING PARTIES in making the recommendations or in giving the rulings provided for in Article XXIII:2. In this connection, panels should consult regularly with the parties to the dispute and give them adequate opportunity to develop a mutually satisfactory solution.

17. Where the parties have failed to develop a mutually satisfactory solution, the panel should submit its findings in a written form. The report of a panel should normally set out the rationale behind any findings and recommendations that it makes. Where a bilateral settlement of the matter has been found, the report of the panel may be confined to a brief description of the case and to reporting that a solution has been reached.

18. To encourage development of mutually satisfactory solutions between the parties and with a view to obtaining their comments, each panel should first submit the descriptive part of its report to the parties concerned, and should subsequently submit to the parties to the dispute its conclusions, or an outline thereof, a reasonable period of time before they are circulated to the CONTRACTING PARTIES.

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<sup>1</sup>A statement is included in the Annex describing the current practice with respect to inclusion on panels of persons from developing countries.

19. If a mutually satisfactory solution is developed by the parties to a dispute before a panel, any contracting party with an interest in the matter has a right to enquire about and be given appropriate information about that solution in so far as it relates to trade matters.

20. The time required by panels will vary with the particular case.<sup>1</sup> However, panels should aim to deliver their findings without undue delay, taking into account the obligation of the CONTRACTING PARTIES to ensure prompt settlement. In cases of urgency the panel would be called upon to deliver its findings within a period normally of three months from the time the panel was established.

21. Reports of panels and working parties should be given prompt consideration by the CONTRACTING PARTIES. The CONTRACTING PARTIES should take appropriate action on reports of panels and working parties within a reasonable period of time. If the case is one brought by a less-developed contracting party, such action should be taken in a specially convened meeting, if necessary. In such cases, in considering what appropriate action might be taken the CONTRACTING PARTIES shall take into account not only the trade coverage of measures complained of, but also their impact on the economy of less-developed contracting parties concerned.

22. The CONTRACTING PARTIES shall keep under surveillance any matter on which they have made recommendations or given rulings. If the CONTRACTING PARTIES' recommendations are not implemented within a reasonable period of time, the contracting party bringing the case may ask the CONTRACTING PARTIES to make suitable efforts with a view to finding an appropriate solution.

23. If the matter is one which has been raised by a less-developed contracting party, the CONTRACTING PARTIES shall consider what further action they might take which would be appropriate to the circumstances.

#### *Surveillance*

24. The CONTRACTING PARTIES agree to conduct a regular and systematic review of developments in the trading system. Particular attention would be paid to developments which affect rights and obligations under the GATT, to matters affecting the interests of less-developed contracting parties, to trade measures notified in accordance with this understanding and to measures which have been subject to consultation, conciliation or dispute settlement procedures laid down in this understanding.

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<sup>1</sup>An explanation is included in the Annex that "in most cases the proceedings of the panels have been completed with a reasonable period of time, extending from three to nine months".

*Technical assistance*

25. The technical assistance services of the GATT secretariat shall, at the request of a less-developed contracting party, assist it in connection with matters dealt with in this understanding.

**ANNEX***Agreed Description of the Customary Practice of the GATT  
in the Field of Dispute Settlement (Article XXIII:2)*

1. Any dispute which has not been settled bilaterally under the relevant provisions of the General Agreement may be referred to the CONTRACTING PARTIES<sup>1</sup> which are obliged, pursuant to Article XXIII:2, to investigate matters submitted to them and make appropriate recommendations or give a ruling on the matter as appropriate. Article XXIII:2 does not indicate whether disputes should be handled by a working party or by a panel.<sup>2</sup>

2. The CONTRACTING PARTIES adopted in 1966 a decision establishing the procedure to be followed for Article XXIII consultations between developed and less-developed contracting parties<sup>3</sup>. This procedure provides, *inter alia*, for the Director-General to employ his good offices with a view to facilitating a solution, for setting up a panel with the task of examining the problem in order to recommend appropriate solutions, and for time-limits for the execution of the different parts of this procedure.

3. The function of a panel has normally been to review the facts of a case and the applicability of GATT provisions and to arrive at an objective assessment of these matters. In this connection, panels have consulted regularly with the parties to the dispute and have given them adequate opportunity to develop a mutually satisfactory solution. Panels have taken appropriate account of the particular interests of developing countries. In cases of failure of the parties to reach a mutually satisfactory settlement, panels have normally given assistance to the CONTRACTING PARTIES in making recommendations or in giving rulings as envisaged in Article XXIII:2.

4. Before bringing a case, contracting parties have exercised their judgement as to whether action under Article XXIII:2 would be fruitful. Those cases which have come before the CONTRACTING PARTIES under this provision have, with few

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<sup>1</sup>The Council is empowered to act for the CONTRACTING PARTIES, in accordance with normal GATT practice.

<sup>2</sup>At the Review Session (1955) the proposal to institutionalize the procedures of panels was not adopted by CONTRACTING PARTIES mainly because they preferred to preserve the existing situation and not to establish judicial procedures which might put excessive strain on the GATT.

<sup>3</sup>BISD 14S/18.

exceptions, been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. The aim of the CONTRACTING PARTIES has always been to secure a positive solution to a dispute. A solution mutually acceptable to the parties to a dispute is clearly to be preferred. In the absence of a mutually agreed solution, the first objective of the CONTRACTING PARTIES is usually to secure the withdrawal of the measures concerned if these are found to be inconsistent with the General Agreement. The provision of compensation should be resorted to only if the immediate withdrawal of the measure is impracticable and as a temporary measure pending the withdrawal of the measures which are inconsistent with the General Agreement. The last resort which Article XXIII provides to the country invoking this procedure is the possibility of suspending the application of concessions or other obligations on a discriminatory basis vis-à-vis the other contracting party, subject to authorization by the CONTRACTING PARTIES of such measures. Such action has only rarely been contemplated and cases taken under Article XXIII:2 have led to such action in only one case.

5. In practice, contracting parties have had recourse to Article XXIII only when in their view a benefit accruing to them under the General Agreement was being nullified or impaired. In cases where there is an infringement of the obligations assumed under the General Agreement, the action is considered *prima facie* to constitute a case of nullification or impairment. A *prima facie* case of nullification or impairment would *ipso facto* require consideration of whether the circumstances are serious enough to justify the authorization of suspension of concessions or obligations, if the contracting party bringing the complaint so requests. This means that there is normally a presumption that a breach of the rules has an adverse impact on other contracting parties, and in such cases, it is up to the contracting parties against whom the complaint has been brought to rebut the charge. Paragraph 1 (b) permits recourse to Article XXIII if nullification or impairment results from measures taken by other contracting parties whether or not these conflict with the provisions of the General Agreement, and paragraph 1 (c) if any other situation exists. If a contracting party bringing an Article XXIII case claims that measures which do not conflict with the provisions of the General Agreement have nullified or impaired benefits accruing to it under the General Agreement, it would be called upon to provide a detailed justification.

6. Concerning the customary elements of the procedures regarding working parties and panels, the following elements have to be noted:

- (i) working parties are instituted by the Council upon the request of one or several contracting parties. The terms of reference of working parties are generally "to examine the matter in the light of the relevant provisions of the General Agreement and to report to the Council". Working parties set up their own working procedures. The practice for working parties has been to hold one or two meetings to examine the matter and a final meeting to discuss conclusions. Working parties are open to participation of any contracting party which has an interest in the matter. Generally working parties consist of a number of delegations varying from about five to twenty according to the importance of the question and the interests involved. The countries who are parties to the dispute are always members of the Working Party and have the same status as other delegations. The

report of the Working Party represents the views of all its members and therefore records different views if necessary. Since the tendency is to strive for consensus, there is generally some measure of negotiation and compromise in the formulation of the Working Party's report. The Council adopts the report. The reports of working parties are advisory opinions on the basis of which the CONTRACTING PARTIES may take a final decision.

- (ii) In the case of dispute, the CONTRACTING PARTIES have established panels (which have been called by different names) or working parties in order to assist them in examining questions raised under Article XXIII:2. Since 1952, panels have become the usual procedure. However, the Council has taken such decisions only after the party concerned has had an occasion to study the complaint and prepare its response before the Council. The terms of reference are discussed and approved by the Council. Normally, these terms of reference are "to examine the matter and to make such findings as will assist the CONTRACTING PARTIES in making the recommendations or rulings provided for in paragraph 2 of Article XXIII". When a contracting party having recourse to Article XXIII:2 raised questions relating to the suspension of concessions or other obligations, the terms of reference were to examine the matter in accordance with the provisions of Article XXIII:2. Members of the panel are usually selected from permanent delegations or, less frequently, from the national administrations in the capitals amongst delegates who participate in GATT activities on a regular basis. The practice has been to appoint a member or members from developing countries when a dispute is between a developing and a developed country.
- (iii) Members of panels are expected to act impartially without instructions from their governments. In a few cases, in view of the nature and complexity of the matter, the parties concerned have agreed to designate non-government experts. Nominations are proposed to the parties concerned by the GATT secretariat. The composition of panels (three or five members depending on the case) has been agreed upon by the parties concerned and approved by the GATT Council. It is recognized that a broad spectrum of opinion has been beneficial in difficult cases, but that the number of panel members has sometimes delayed the composition of panels, and therefore the process of dispute settlement.
- (iv) Panels set up their own working procedures. The practice for the panels has been to hold two or three formal meetings with the parties concerned. The panel invited the parties to present their views either in writing and/or orally in the presence of each other. The panel can question both parties on any matter which it considers relevant to the dispute. Panels have also heard the views of any contracting party having a substantial interest in the matter, which is not directly party to the dispute, but which has expressed in the Council a desire to present its views. Written memoranda submitted to the panel have been considered confidential, but are made available to the parties to the dispute. Panels often consult with and seek

information from any relevant source they deem appropriate and they sometimes consult experts to obtain their technical opinion on certain aspects of the matter. Panels may seek advice or assistance from the secretariat in its capacity as guardian of the General Agreement, especially on historical or procedural aspects. The secretariat provides the secretary and technical services for panels.

- (v) Where the parties have failed to develop a mutually satisfactory solution, the panel has submitted its findings in a written form. Panel reports have normally set out findings of fact, the applicability of relevant provisions, and the basic rationale behind any findings and recommendations that it has made. Where a bilateral settlement of the matter has been found, the report of the panel has been confined to a brief description of the case and to reporting that a solution has been reached.
- (vi) The reports of panels have been drafted in the absence of the parties in the light of the information and the statements made.
- (vii) To encourage development of mutually satisfactory solutions between the parties and with a view to obtaining their comments, each panel has normally first submitted the descriptive part of its report to the parties concerned, and also their conclusions, or an outline thereof, a reasonable period of time before they have been circulated to the CONTRACTING PARTIES.
- (viii) In accordance with their terms of reference established by the CONTRACTING PARTIES panels have expressed their views on whether an infringement of certain rules of the General Agreement arises out of the measure examined. Panels have also, if so requested by the CONTRACTING PARTIES, formulated draft recommendations addressed to the parties. In yet other cases panels were invited to give a technical opinion on some precise aspect of the matter (e.g. on the modalities of a withdrawal or suspension in regard to the volume of trade involved). The opinions expressed by the panel members on the matter are anonymous and the panel deliberations are secret.
- (ix) Although the CONTRACTING PARTIES have never established precise deadlines for the different phases of the procedure, probably because the matters submitted to panels differ as to their complexity and their urgency, in most cases the proceedings of the panels have been completed within a reasonable period of time, extending from three to nine months.

The 1966 decision by the CONTRACTING PARTIES referred to in paragraph 2 above lays down in its paragraph 7 that the Panel shall report within a period of sixty days from the date the matter was referred to it.